The Cross of Freedom

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The Cross of Freedom

Life under Austro-Hungarian rule was not easy for a Ukrainian peasant living in the provinces of Galicia and Bukovinia during the latter part of the nineteenth century. Driven to despair by high taxes, land shortages and political oppression, many began to look to emigration as their only hope. Canada, a country which offered the promise of *vilni zemli* or free lands, seemed an attractive destination, and by 1891 the first of the Ukrainian emigrants had arrived in Quebec. In 1896 a large group of settlers set out from their homeland and travelled to the area of Dauphin Lake, Manitoba where they established the third Ukrainian settlement in Canada and the second in the province. Three structures built in the area — the Cross of Freedom, St. Michael's Ukrainian Catholic Church and Terebowla School — stand as a memorial to the early Ukrainian settlers, the freedom they achieved and the traditions they preserved in the new land.

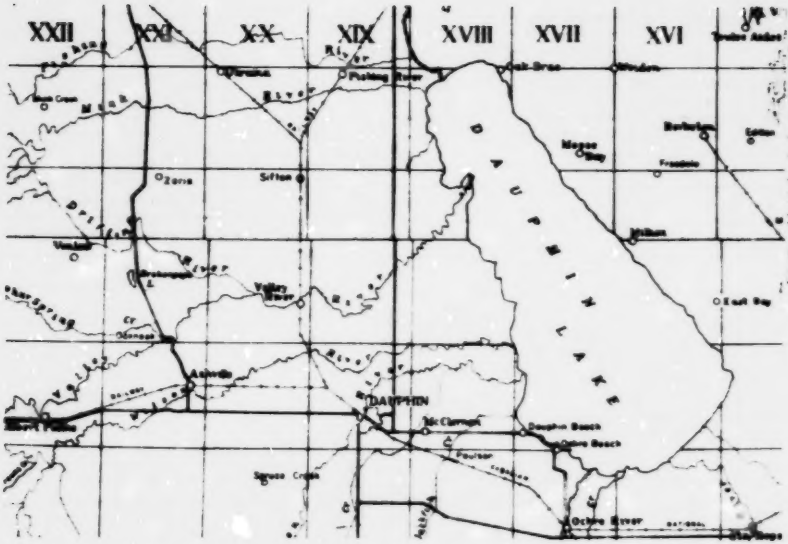
The Cross of Freedom

Ukrainian emigration to Canada began in 1891 with the arrival of Vasyl Eleniak and Ivan Pylipiw, two young men who eventually encouraged a few friends and relatives to leave their homeland to establish the first Ukrainian settlement at Edna-Star, Alberta. More extensive emigration to Canada did not begin until Dr. Joseph Oleskiw, a professor of Agriculture from Lviv, published two emigration pamphlets, "About Free Land" and "On Emigration." The first of these publications promoting the advantages of settling in Canada was distributed in 1895 and widely read throughout the western Ukraine. Within one year, the first major group of Ukrainian immigrants arrived in Quebec and most of these settled near Edna-Star.

Shortly after their arrival a second party of settlers, led by Cyril Genik, established homesteads in the Stuartburn area of Manitoba. The Stuartburn group was followed by Vasyl Ksionzyk and a number of settlers who began homesteading in the Lake Dauphin region near present-day Valley River, Manitoba in 1896. They were joined in December by a few more families, and their settlement, the second of its kind in Manitoba, was called "Terebowla" after the name of the village from which many of these Ukrainian pioneers came.

Unlike the Mennonite or Icelandic pioneers who came to Manitoba, the new Ukrainian settlers did not acquire a block of land as a settlement reserve but chose instead to establish individual homesteads in compact settlements. They also preferred densely wooded land reminiscent of their homeland to the bald, flat prairie available elsewhere. The area around the Valley and Drifting rivers was an ideal spot, and the settlers soon set about the arduous task of breaking the land, acquiring tools and animals and constructing homes for their families. Despite the usual hardships of settlement — the cold, droughts, occasional fires, the ubiquitous mosquito and the loneliness and isolation — many of the settlers prospered.

Isolated as they were, the Ukrainians at Terebowla were determined to preserve their faith in the new land. Their Christian roots were deep and strong, dating back to the introduction of the Orthodox religion by the church centred in Constantinople. By the sixteenth century, after much of the Ukraine



A map showing the Valley and Drifting rivers area

Immigrants from the western Ukraine, c. 1912.

had fallen under the domination of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, most Ukrainians remained loyal to the Greek Orthodox Church and the leadership of the Patriarch of Constantinople, but some, particularly those in the western Ukraine, were influenced by Catholic Poland and accepted the authority of the Pope in Rome. The Uniate or Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, formed in 1596, retained most Orthodox rites but recognized the spiritual leadership of the Pope. Many of the settlers who arrived in Manitoba were from the western provinces of Bukovinia and Galicia and brought with them the two religious traditions of their homeland.

Finding a Ukrainian Greek-Catholic priest for the members of the Terebowla settlement was not an easy task. Dr. Joseph Oleskiw in Lviv suggested that Vasyl Ksionzyk contact the Ukrainian Catholic Reverend Mr. Nestor Dmytriw of Mount Carmel, Pennsylvania. Dmytriw, an editor of the Philadelphia-based Ukrainian publication *Svoboda*, agreed to visit the colony in April of 1897 as part of his tour of Ukrainian settlements in Canada. Later that year, the priest published an account of his visit, entitled *Kanadiyska Rus; Podorozhni Spomyny* or *Canadian Ruthenia — Travel Reminiscences*, and this document recorded, among other things, his observations of the Terebowla settlement.

Dmytriw arrived in Winnipeg on 4 April 1897, where he was given a jurisdictional document from Metropolitan Sembratowych of Lviv, authorizing him to minister to the needs of the Ukrainian settlers. After holding a service, communion and confession at the Winnipeg Immigration Hall, the priest proceeded by train to the Lake Dauphin region. Arriving in Dauphin on April 9th, he spent the night with a group of his countrymen at the town's immigration shed.

Early in the afternoon of the following day, Father Dmytriw hired a team of horses and a wagon and ventured into the wilderness to the colony along Drifting River. Forced to abandon the rig at the overflowing Valley River, he proceeded on foot until he came to a farm where he was able to hire another wagon. Once he reached densely wooded bush, he left behind the second rig and again proceeded on foot. Alone in the wilderness with the night closing in, Dmytriw's alarm increased. "I experienced the fear of a lonely human being who was like a small worm amidst invincible silent nature," he wrote, "a fear that engulfs one who faces the night in the heart of the primeval forest or the steppes." After wandering for some time, he finally came upon the homestead of a young Scotsman who led him to Vasyl Ksionzyk's farm where he rested for the night.

The next morning the priest awoke to find a crowd of seventy-eight people filling the yard. Errand boys were immediately sent off to Dauphin to get Dmytriw's vestments, and while waiting for their return, he surveyed the farm. According to his account, a wagon, which apparently served as a temporary pantry, stood in the front yard. Pots and pans were stored under the wagon box and one of these was covered in the weekly *Svoboda*, the newspaper he helped to edit. Ksionzyk's farm also included a stable which housed two cows, two oxen and two calves. At this time the entire colony included some fifteen homesteads. Given that the total inventory of settlement livestock included five oxen, two cows and two calves, Ksionzyk's farm was probably among the most prosperous.

Courtesy Manitoba Archives

A Ukrainian farmhouse, c. 1905

Once he received his vestments, the priest began hearing confessions. A late season snowstorm the next day prevented an outdoor mass, so an improvised altar was erected by the wall of the "kitchen" in the Ksionzyk home and worshippers crowded in to hear the words of the liturgy. After the mass and a baptism the weather cleared and the congregation moved outside. Dmytriw was taken to a site on the far bank of the Drifting River, (at the northwest quarter of section 20, township 26, range 20, west of the Principal Meridian) where the settlers had erected a rough cross, built of poplar logs, to commemorate the freedom attained by the Ukrainians upon their emigration to Canada. The priest consecrated the cross and addressed the crowd, speaking of their history and struggle as a people. The year 1896, he declared, was their first year of real freedom, the year in which they had finally escaped the bondage of lords and government to establish a new life for themselves.

The Cross of Freedom at Valley River was the first of its kind on Canadian soil and was followed by similar memorials in other Ukrainian settlements. Over the years as its base decayed, the cross was planted further into the ground, but it finally collapsed. In 1966, another crowd gathered at the site on the bank of the Drifting River, this time to witness the unveiling of a seven foot tall, gray granite cross erected as a memorial to the original Cross of Freedom.

St. Michael's Ukrainian Catholic Church

During a stay in the Dauphin Lake region, Father Dmytriw also travelled north to the homesteads of another group of Ukrainian settlers. The colony twenty-two kilometres northwest of Valley River had been settled in 1897 by a group of people from the Borchiw region of the Ukraine, most of whom

came from the village of Volkovets. They called their new settlement Volkivtsi, but it was later known as Mink River.

It was not long after they had established themselves on the poor, sandy soil of the region, that the settlers heard rumours of Dmytriw's impending visit. A church committee was quickly organized and a spot for a cemetery chosen on the farm of Ivan Perepeluk. At the site the settlers cut down trees and erected an altar, which was decorated with a cloth and a picture of the Virgin Mother. The priest arrived in the fledgling colony with Vasyl Ksionzyk and conducted services there on 12 September 1897. He consecrated the cemetery where a wooden cross bearing the date of the service commemorated the occasion. According to an eye witness account, it was not until the next year that two settlers, Ivan Perepeluk and Yuri Ivasiuk, erected a small chapel of poplar logs where the altar had stood.

The residents of Volkivtsi soon began discussing the possibility of expanding their tiny chapel into a permanent, fully-consecrated church. At this time, the men were still too busy clearing their own land and working as itinerant labourers to undertake the project but a few years later, in the winter of 1901-02, the pioneers began to make definite plans for construction. Since Reverend Dmytriw's visit, the close knit group had paid church dues to finance the project and had obtained the necessary building materials. In the fall of 1902, the settlers devoted a few days to the construction of the church; they added a much larger section to the end of the chapel and covered the roof with shingles. The interior was completed that winter, each family donating a religious picture for its decoration. The altar was draped with a cloth, and stools provided seating for the worshippers. The church was heated by a small iron stove. A cross erected in the cemetery stands as a record of the church's consecration to St. Michael in 1902 by the Reverend Wasyl Zholdak.

Courtesy Historic Resources Branch

St. Michael's Ukrainian Catholic Church, located at the Cross of Freedom site.

The church survived for many years without a resident priest, and so the parishioners conducted their own services. Ivan Perepeluk served as church elder and Yuri Ivasiuk as president of the church committee. Petro Kokolsky acted as treasurer. Except for the deacon, Yakiv Dutka, all of the members of the congregation were illiterate. St. Michael's was graced over the years with visits by a few important dignitaries such as Bishop Nikita Budka in 1916, and Bishop Vasyl Ludecka in 1940. At one time, the congregation numbered over thirty families, but the church was eventually abandoned as the pioneers passed away, and their sons and daughters left the unproductive land.

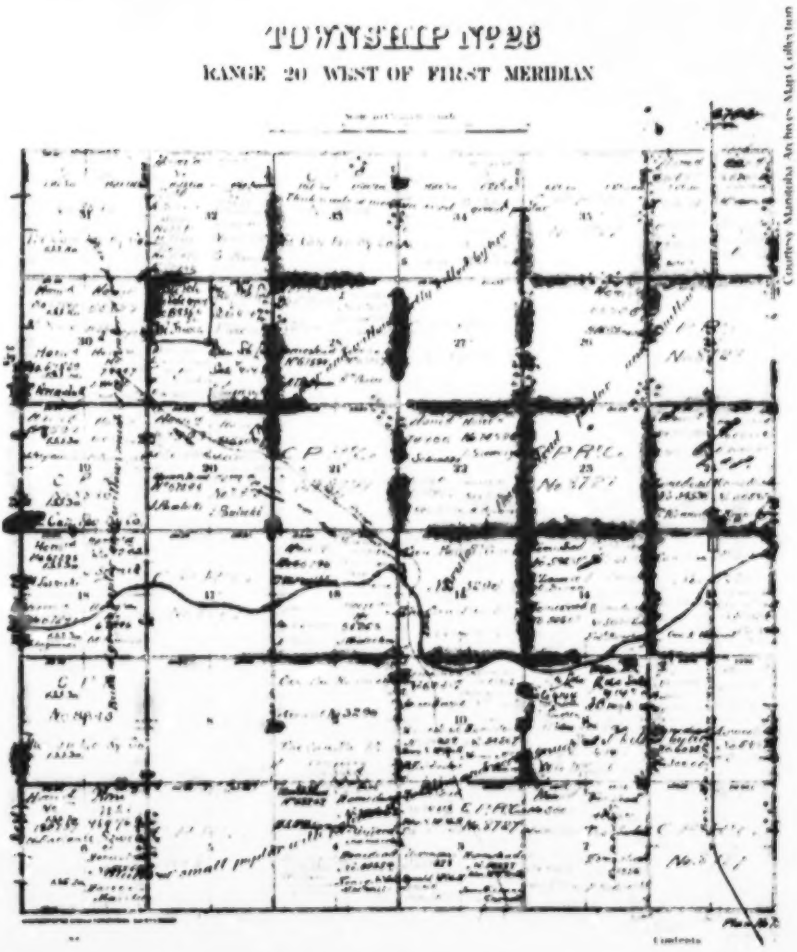
Although originally built on the southeast corner of section 14, township 28, range 21 west of the Principal Meridian on Ivan Perepeluk's farm, St. Michael's Ukrainian Catholic Church is now located at the Cross of Freedom site. If the cross stood for the social and political freedom gained by the Ukrainian settlers in the new land, the church now stands nearby as a symbol of their commitment to preserve the religious traditions which they brought from the old world.

Terebowla School

Once they had established farms and tended to the religious needs of their community, the Ukrainian settlers, like thousands of pioneers before them, turned their attention to the issue of education. Although many of the settlers in the Dauphin Lake district were anxious to provide their children with schooling, the time consuming work of homesteading and limited money restricted what they were able to do. It was not until the Presbyterian Church became involved in the late 1890s, that action was finally taken, and "Terebowla" or "Trembowla" School, located on the southeast corner of section 29, township 26, range 20 west of the Principal Meridian, was constructed and opened for classes.

Little attention had been paid to the educational needs of the Ukrainian settlers prior to 1898, but in July of that year the Portage la Prairie Presbytery, which held jurisdiction over the Dauphin area, received an offer from the Student's Missionary Society of Manitoba College to pay for the services of a student in the Dauphin district. On 5 September 1900, the Presbytery resolved to request a grant of $200.00 from the Church and Manse Board to erect schools among the Ukrainian settlers. At the same time, the Home Missions Committee in Winnipeg began sponsoring missionary activity among the settlers in both the Dauphin and Stuartburn areas.

An early pioneer and trustee of the Valley River School District observed that the Terebowla district was organized as early as 1897, but it was not until 1899 that it was officially recognized in a bylaw passed by the Rural Municipality of Dauphin. The original district encompassed sections 7 through 10 and 15 through 18 in township 27, range 20, and sections 16 to 22 and 27 to 34 in township 26, range 20. The actual construction and operation of Terebowla school was financed by the Presbyterian church in nearby Sifton. Registered as number 1040 with the Department of Education, the small log school was probably opened some time between 1899 and the middle of 1901. A letter from Reverend Mr. James Robertson to the Department of the Interior in Ottawa, dated 26 June 1901, which requested that the south-



A map of township 26 showing section 20 where the cross of freedom was erected and section 29 where the original Terebowla school was located

east corner of section 29, township 26, range 20 be secured as a site for a Ukrainian school already in operation, confirms that the school was functioning in that year.

The land was eventually leased to the Presbyterian Church for fifty cents per acre. By February 1902, it was reported that three schools had been opened among the Ukrainians — at Riding Mountain, "Trimbowla" and Ethelbert. Mr. John (or Ivan) Negrych was employed as a teacher at the Terebowla School. Attendance at each of the three schools continued to improve and the Ukrainians, at first suspicious of the Presbyterian Church's endeavours

to supply them with educational facilities, now seemed very eager to have a school established in every district.

By 1905, the tiny school was enjoying considerable success with an attendance of eighteen, seven boys and eleven girls, and a yearly allowance of $120.18. The building was located "right on the S.E. corner acre of the section," with one acre of land fenced in around it. As Ukrainian was the native language of the pupils, it seemed most appropriate to have Mr. Negrych as teacher. He was eventually replaced by Mr. S. Buz and a Presbyterian Minister, Mr. Peter McGregor but, after 1905, Buz handled the duties on his own. The school was also used for Presbyterian services, although the Ukrainian settlers showed little interest in attending.

The Terebowla School was used uninterrupted until 1916 when, under provincial jurisdiction, it was removed to the northeast corner of the same section. A second school was later erected and the original building was converted into a teacher's residence. On 1 September 1965, the Terebowla School District was dissolved and the students were transported by bus to another division.

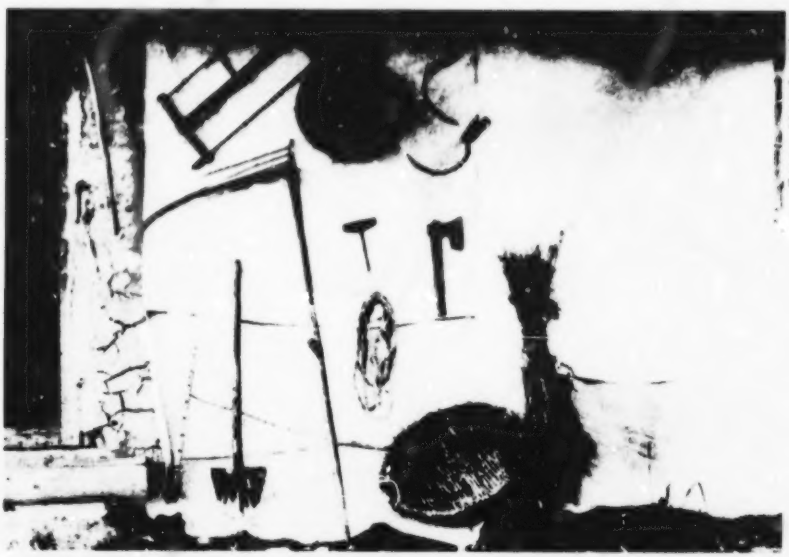
The Cross of Freedom historical site includes structures of provincial and local importance. Although St. Michael's Church and Terebowla School were not the first religious or educational institutions established by Ukrainian settlers in Manitoba, they stand as evidence of the aspirations and traditions of the pioneers who settled in the Dauphin Lake district. The cross itself and its symbolic meaning are of historical significance to Ukrainians throughout Canada and North America. Standing near the site of the first Ukrainian High Mass celebrated on Canadian soil, it was the first cross of its kind erected as a memorial to a new found freedom in a new land.

Courtesy Historic Resources Branch

The schoolhouse now located at the Cross of Freedom site was sent from the River Bend District to replace the second Terebowla school which was destroyed by fire in 1960.

Courtesy Manitoba Archives

Ukrainian women gardening, c. 1915



Courtesy Manitoba Archives

A collection of the type of farm implements used by Ukrainian settlers, c. 1907.

Suggestions for Further Reading

A number of published sources provide information on the Dauphin Lake Ukrainian settlement, its early development, and the 1897 visit to the district by Reverend Nestor Dmytriw. These include: Reverend Mr. Dmytriw's " 'Canadian Ruthenia'; a Traveller's Memoirs", in *Land of Pain, Land of Promise; First Person Accounts by Ukrainian Pioneers, 1891-1914*, H. Piniuta, ed. (Saskatoon: Western Producer Prairie Books, 1978); Vladimir J. Kaye's *Early Ukrainian Settlements in Canada, 1895-1900*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1975); Michael H. Marunchak's *Studii do Istorii Ukraintsiv Kanady* (Winnipeg: Ukrainian Free Academy of Sciences, 1964-1965, 2 volumes) and *The Ukrainian Canadians: A History* (Winnipeg, Ukrainian Free Academy of Sciences, 1970). The published reminiscences of W.J. Perepeluk, *Novymy Dorohamy: biografichny Napys pro Vasylia Perepeliuka*, N. Kosuz'Ka, ed. (Winnipeg: the author, 1972) provide very useful information on the construction of St. Michael's Church, while the *Annual Reports of the Department of Education, 1897-1911*, trace the development of Terebowla and other schools in the Dauphin area.

Two important primary sources consulted for this study were the various records in the Archives of the Presbyterian Church of Canada, at the University of Winnipeg, and the "Homestead files and correspondence" of the Government of Canada, Department of the Interior.

Credits:

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The cover photograph of the cross of freedom is printed courtesy of the Historic Resources Branch.

The Cross of Freedom

A group of Ukrainian settlers seeking free land and political freedom took up homesteads in 1896 near Valley River, Manitoba. They named their new community after their native village, Terebowla. Here in April 1897, the Reverend Nestor Dmytriw celebrated the first Ukrainian Catholic Mass on Canadian soil. After the service, he accompanied the worshippers to a site on the far bank of Drifting River where he consecrated a traditional Cross of Freedom erected by the settlers to mark the beginning of their new life in Canada. This wooden memorial stood on the site for many years. Similar symbolic crosses were erected soon thereafter in other Ukrainian settlements in Canada.